



steep

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SUGGESTED
FOR MATURE
READERS

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"A LONG TIME AGO, THERE WAS A KID NAMED GABRIEL BRADY. HE WASN'T THE NICEST KID IN THE WORLD, BUT HE WASN'T THE MEANEST OR ANYTHING EITHER.



"WORST THING HE EVER DID WAS PICK ON HIS LITTLE BROTHER, TEDDY, REALLY. BUT THAT'S WHAT BIG BROTHERS DO, ISN'T IT?



"THEN ONE NIGHT, GABE AND TEDDY'S PARENTS WALKED INTO A SUPERMARKET TEN SECONDS BEFORE A LUNATIC WITH A MACHINE GUN.



"THE LUNATIC KILLED THEM AND FOURTEEN OTHER PEOPLE BEFORE A SWAT SNIPER BLEW HIS BRAINS ALL OVER THE ICE CREAM FREEZER.



"AND SINCE THEY HAD NO OTHER RELATIVES, POOR GABE AND TEDDY WERE SENT INTO FOSTER CARE.

"IT WAS REALLY SCARY FOR THEM, GABE WAS ELEVEN, AND TEDDY WAS ONLY NINE, SO GABE HAD TO TAKE CARE OF HIS LITTLE BROTHER AND PROTECT HIM.



"AND FOSTER CARE MOVED THEM AROUND A LOT, SO JUST WHEN THEY WOULD START TO FEEL THEY HAD A HOME, THEY WERE ON A BUS TO ANOTHER HOUSE ACROSS TOWN.



"BUT THEY FINALLY CAME TO THE HOME OF OLD DAN. OLD DAN WAS THE NICEST MAN THEY'D EVER MET. HE FED THEM SWEETS AND LET THEM STAY UP LATE TO WATCH TV.



"THE ONLY THING WEIRD ABOUT OLD DAN WAS THAT HE RAISED PIT BULLS, SO THE KIDS WEREN'T ALLOWED TO GO IN THE BACK YARD.



"FOR A WHILE, GABE AND TEDDY WERE HAPPY, BUT THEY THOUGHT IT WAS WEIRD THAT NONE OF THE OTHER KIDS SEEMED TO STAY AROUND LONG.



"THEN ONE DAY OLD DAN TOOK THEM FOR A RIDE WITH HIM AND SOME OF HIS DOGS.

"AT FIRST THEY WERE EXCITED, BUT THEN THEY GOT KIND OF SCARED. SOMETHING JUST DIDN'T SEEM RIGHT...



"HE TOOK THEM TO A BIG BARN IN THE WOODS, WHERE THERE WERE A LOT OF OTHER PEOPLE, ALL EXCITED AND DRUNK AND MEAN-LOOKING.



"AND INSIDE THE BARN, THEY SAW THERE WAS A BIG PIT WHERE THE DOGS WERE FIGHTING. THE MEN SEEMED TO REALLY LIKE TO WATCH THE DOGS FIGHT, BUT TEDDY STARTED CRYING.



"OLD DAN DIDN'T LIKE THAT, SO HE TOOK TEDDY AND PUT HIM IN THE PIT WITH ONE OF THE DOGS, AND TOLD HIM IT WAS TIME TO BE A MAN..."



"THE MEN PLACED BETS ON HOW LONG TEDDY WOULD LAST. OLD DAN TOLD GABE ONLY ONE KID HAD EVER BEATEN THE DOGS, AND THAT WAS HIM, FIFTY YEARS BEFORE..."



"TEDDY DIDN'T LAST TEN SEC--"

HEY!



NOT TO BE A DICK, BUT NOBODY ASKED FOR YOUR ORIGIN STORY, KID...

I JUST-- I THOUGHT IT WAS STANDARD PROCEDURE... YOU KNOW, WAY TO KILL TIME ON MISSIONS AND ALL...



MAYBE FOR YOU YOUNG PUPS.

BUT IF ME OR HOLDEN WANT YOUR LIFE STORY, PIT BULL, WE'LL ASK FOR IT...



There's nothing like the chip on the shoulder of an up-and-comer. Guys like Pit Bull here, just a few steps away from being a serious player.

Gets his name in the paper once or twice and thinks he's famous. Sets his sights on the next rung on the ladder, and now that's all he can think about.

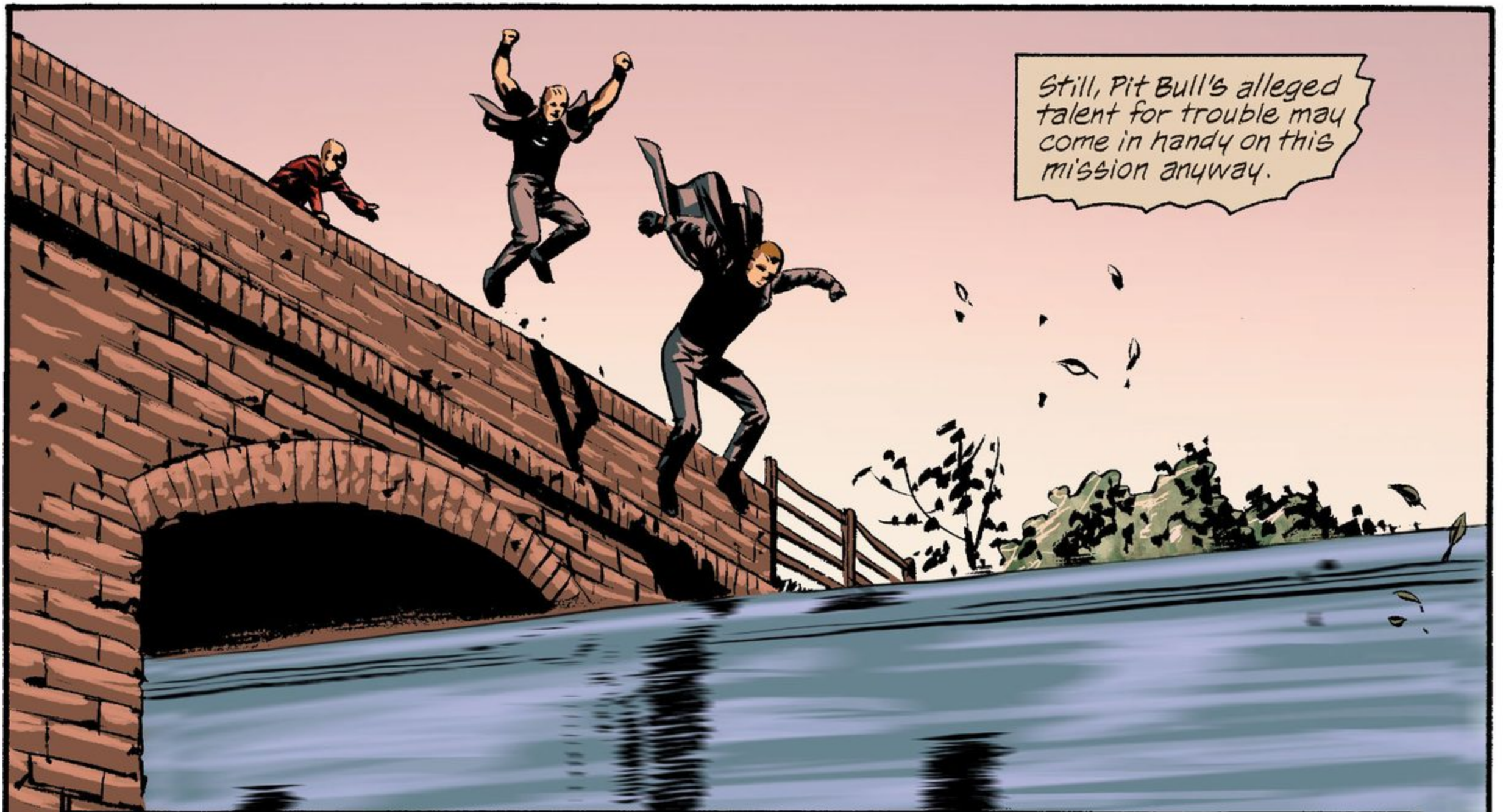
Guys like that can be a real liability on a mission, because they care more about what the success will mean to them than just getting the job done.

THE FIRST MISTAKE

But Tao is considering moving him up, so Genocide and I are stuck with him this time out, at least...

ALL RIGHT, HERE WE GO...

POPULATION
CONTROL



Still, Pit Bull's alleged talent for trouble may come in handy on this mission anyway.

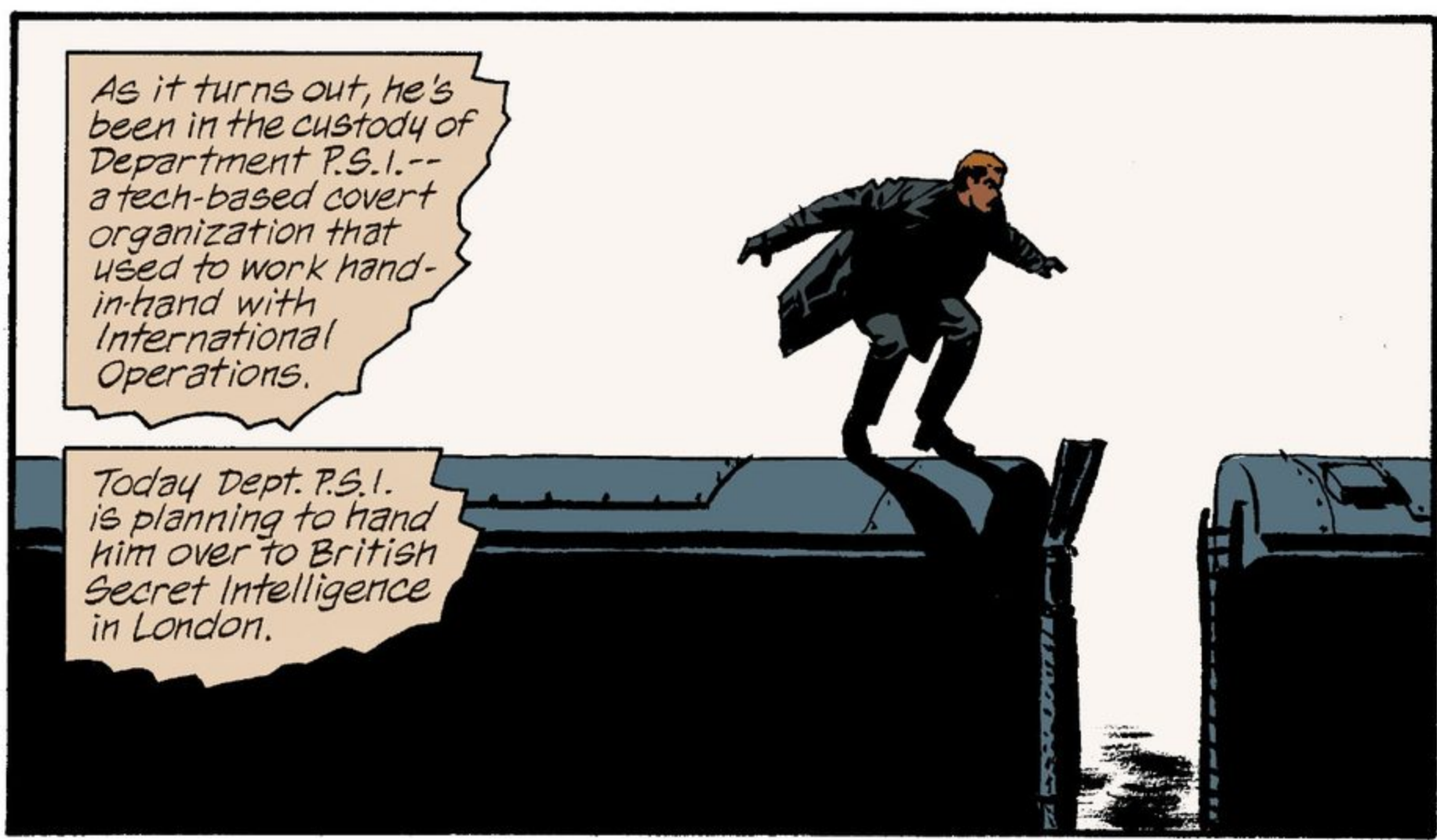
And what is our mission? One of subterfuge more than substance really.

Six weeks ago, Jeffers Nillsun, the assistant to the scientist who adapted the technology that made the black hole suitcase bomb possible, went missing.



As it turns out, he's been in the custody of Department P.S.I.-- a tech-based covert organization that used to work hand-in-hand with International Operations.

Today Dept. P.S.I. is planning to hand him over to British Secret Intelligence in London.



We're going to intercept that delivery and make it appear that someone else did, which is where it gets complicated...

Because no one can see us... Not and live and tell about it, at least. Or else everyone will know we have Nillsun.

And while Tao does have some use for Nillsun, the true purpose here is to turn allies against each other.

So we get in and out fast and leave clues that point to the Russians.

Shell casings, a cell-phone dropped during a struggle. Routine counter-intelligence. Hopefully no one will have to die if we do it right.

Pit Bull's job? To create a diversion before Genocide and I act.

--DON'T WANT ANYONE GETTING SERIOUSLY HURT, EITHER. NOTHING THAT WILL PREVENT YOU BEING ABLE TO GET AWAY MOSTLY UNNOTICED.

I KNOW, I KNOW... I GOT IT THE LAST TWO TIMES, CARYER. I'M THINKING, ELECTRICAL FIRE IN THE KITCHEN...

AND HEY, I JUST WANT TO SAY HOW COOL IT IS TO FINALLY BE WORKING TOGETHER. I MEAN, YOU GUYS, YOU'RE LIKE LEGENDS TO A LOT OF--

LOOK, JUST KEEP YOUR HEAD IN THE GAME. ALL THAT OTHER STUFF, THAT'S BULLSHIT.

WHEN YOU'RE OUT HERE,
THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS
IS THE TASK AT HAND.

YEAH, SURE,
I GET YOU...
I GET YOU.

YOU BETTER,
KID.

*Genocide is right, too,
because after my last
meeting with Tao and the
other Prodigals, I don't
think I can afford any
more screw-ups on my
watch.*

--AND AFTER YOU KILLED
TURBINE YOU DISCOVERED
HE'D ALREADY DEACTIVATED
THE DEVICE?

YES SIR. I BROUGHT
IT IN ANYWAY, HOPING
WE COULD SALVAGE
SOMETHING.

AND HOW DO YOU
THINK TURBINE LEARNED
THE DISARMING CODES?

PROBABLY FROM THE SAME
PERSON WHO TIPPED HIM OFF
TO THE JOB. I'M ASSUMING
SOMEONE ON THE TEAM WE
GOT IT FROM, TRYING A
DOUBLE-CROSS.



AND THEN SHE HITS THE EMERGENCY STOP BUTTON AND FUCKS YOUR BRAINS OUT AGAIN, RIGHT?

NOT EXACTLY...

WHAT THEN, *PARKING LOT*? ON THE HOOD OF YOUR CAR?

STOP. I'M NOT SAYING SHIT, MAN...

FUCK, YOU ARE SUCH A *WOMAN* SOMETIMES. AVOIDING THE QUESTION JUST MEANS YES ANYWAY. DIDN'T YOU EVER LEARN THAT?

Y'KNOW, I'M STARTING TO REGRET TELLING YOU ABOUT HER AT ALL.

HA, RIGHT. YOU WERE DYING TO TALK.

It's true... My secret thing with Miss Misery had been driving me nuts.

She was always wanting sex in risky places, which I guess was to be expected with her, but who can go through that without telling a friend?

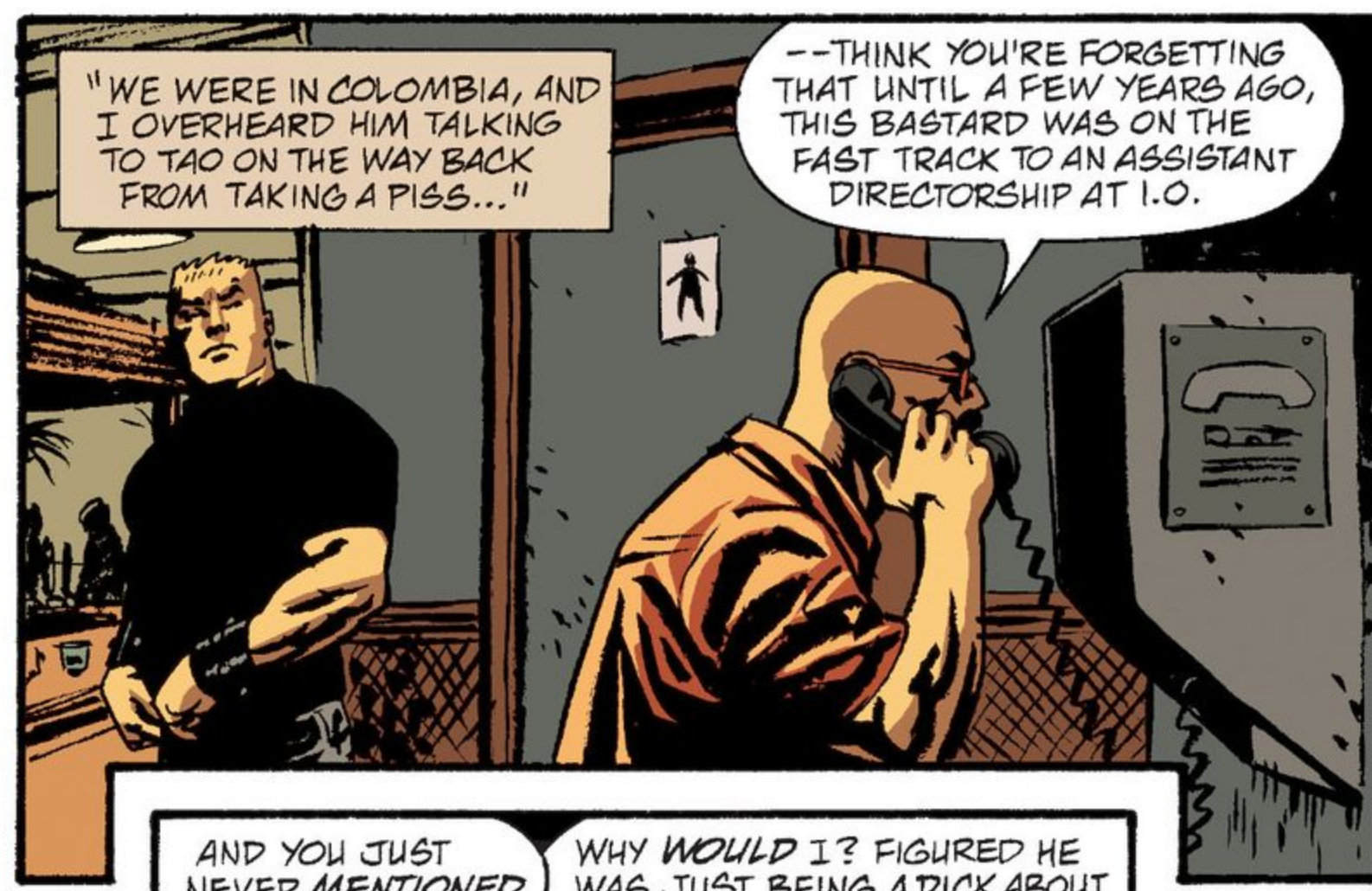
WHATEVER... LOOK, WHAT I'M GETTING AT IS THAT PETER GRIMM SEEMS TO HAVE IT IN FOR ME FOR SOME REASON...

YOU'VE BEEN ON A FEW JOBS WITH HIM. HE EVER SAY ANYTHING?



NAH, NOT TO ME...
I DON'T KNOW, MAN,
SHIT...

THERE WAS
THIS ONE THING
ABOUT THREE
WEEKS AGO.



"WE WERE IN COLOMBIA, AND
I OVERHEARD HIM TALKING
TO TAO ON THE WAY BACK
FROM TAKING A PISS..."

--THINK YOU'RE FORGETTING
THAT UNTIL A FEW YEARS AGO,
THIS BASTARD WAS ON THE
FAST TRACK TO AN ASSISTANT
DIRECTORSHIP AT I.O.



...NO SIR... NO... I JUST
FIND IT HARD TO
BELIEVE THAT I'M
BEING MORE SKEPTICAL
ABOUT THIS THAN
YOU ARE...



AND YOU JUST
NEVER MENTIONED
THIS TO ME?

WHY WOULD I? FIGURED HE
WAS JUST BEING A DICK ABOUT
YOUR PROMOTION, MAN... IT'S
NOT EXACTLY LIKE THE GUY
HAS ANY FRIENDS.



ONLY PERSON HE'S EVER
SAID ANYTHING NICE ABOUT
IS YOUR GIRLFRIEND, AND THAT
WAS MOSTLY ABOUT HER TITS.



YOU DON'T NEED ME TO TELL
YOU TO WATCH YOUR BACK
AROUND THAT FUCKER. HE
DIDN'T GET TO BE A PRODIGAL
WITHOUT SCREWING OVER A
LOT OF BASTARDS ON THE
WAY.

YOU
GOT THAT
RIGHT.



HEY, WE GONNA
DO THIS JOB, OR
WHAT?

According to our intel they've got Nillsun in a suite, two sections up from the dinner car.

Assuming procedures haven't changed, Pit Bull's distraction will pull two agents off his security detail, leaving only one for us to deal with.

That's the plan, at least, and it should've worked well.

But as I'm trying to focus and push my worries about Peter Grimm's suspicions out of my head, a face in the crowd jumps out at me...

...And then mine jumps out at her.

And everything falls to pieces.

WE'VE BEEN MADE. ABORT, NOW.

WHAT...? BUT--







LET'S GO. THIS WHOLE AREA'S GOING TO BE CRAWLING WITH AGENTS IN TEN MINUTES...

THE FUCK HAPPENED? WHY'D YOU BLOCK MY SHOT, CARVER?



YEAH, HOLDEN, WHO THE HELL WAS THAT UP THERE?



JUST SOMEONE I USED TO KNOW...



In fact, her name was Veronica St. James...



... And in another life, we were engaged.



The funny part is that I'd been thinking about her a lot lately. Ever since things had started to heat up with Miss Misery...

Got me wondering why I'd always gone for these "throw caution to the wind" type of women.



And I thought about the first time Veronica and I worked together, Paris in '96. She was my tech liaison from Dept. P.S.I.

It was a boring mission, really. Mostly sitting around a room listening to wire taps and taking pictures of people going in and out of an embassy.



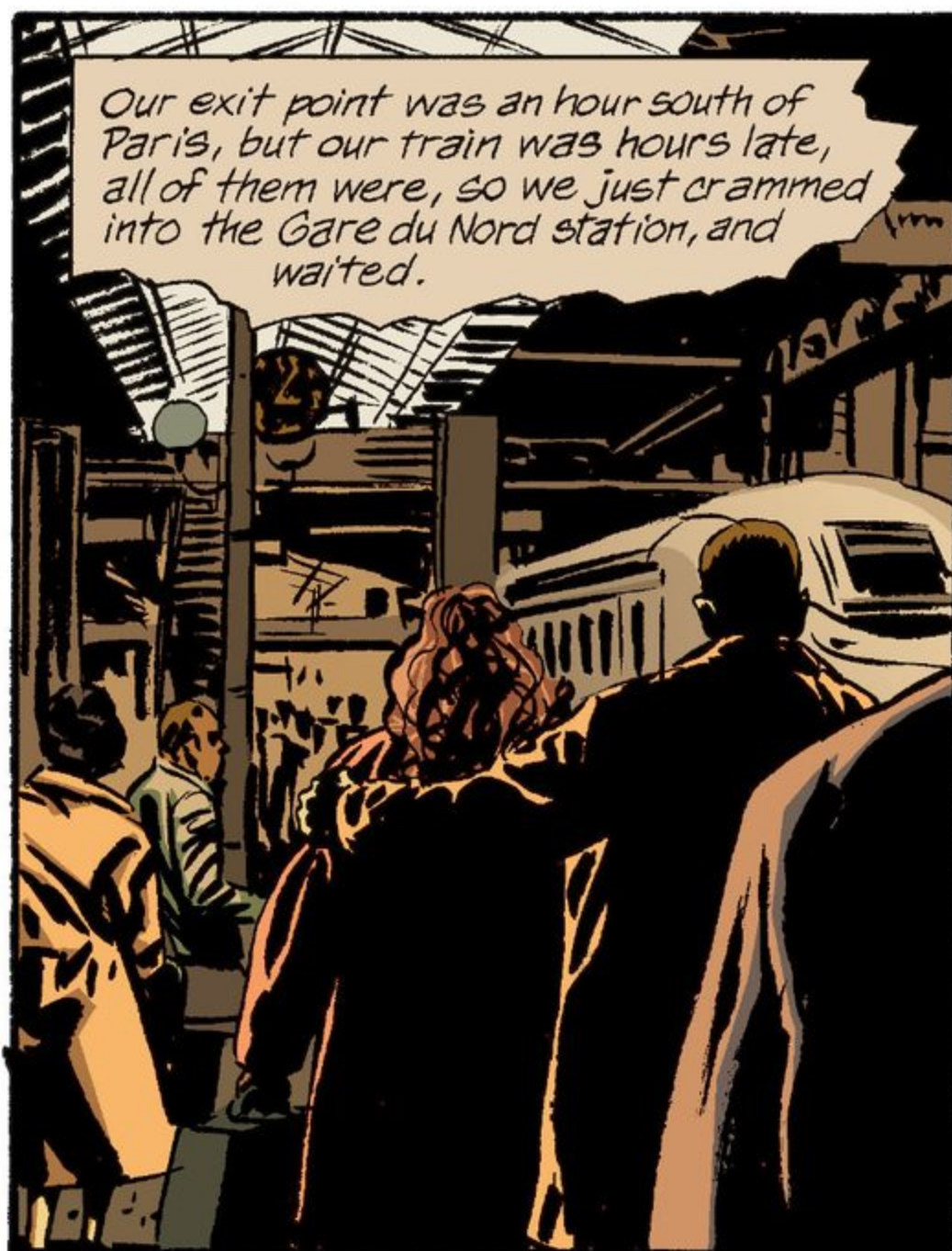
Waiting for the right man to show up so I could take him off the board.



We'd been cooped up for two and a half weeks, and hadn't even realized Bastille Day was approaching, so we're trying to get out just as the city is coming alive...

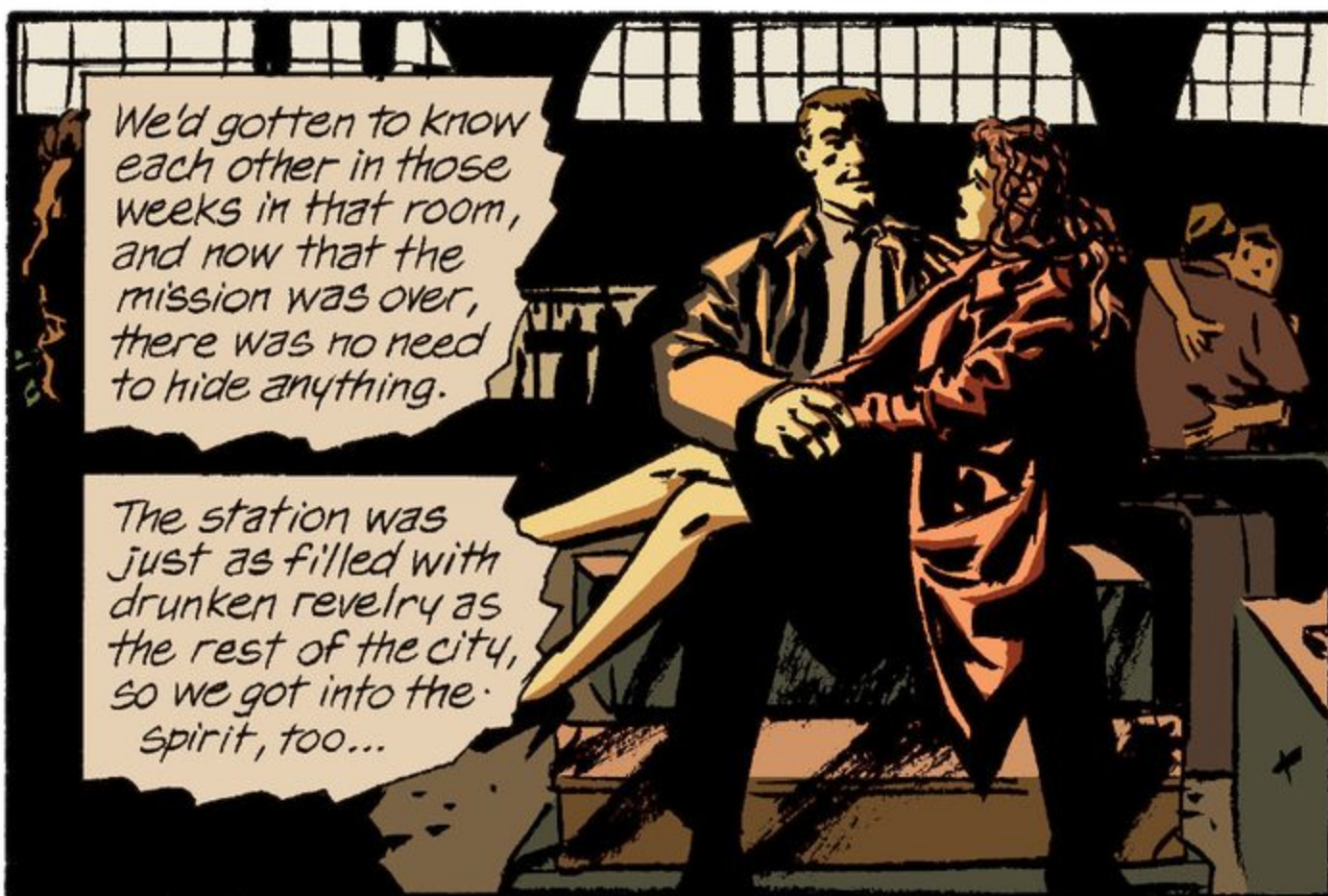


Our exit point was an hour south of Paris, but our train was hours late, all of them were, so we just crammed into the Gare du Nord station, and waited.



We'd gotten to know each other in those weeks in that room, and now that the mission was over, there was no need to hide anything.

The station was just as filled with drunken revelry as the rest of the city, so we got into the spirit, too...



We ended up having sex in a little alcove around four in the morning. She pulling me inside of her as I sat on a suitcase.



And all I can remember from the drunken haze is how good she smelled, and how all these eyes were watching us out of the darkness.

She didn't care.



Three years later Lynch is calling her into his office to give her the bad news. That I've gone rogue, traded with the enemy.

I can only imagine her face that day.



Lynch made a point of telling me she was heading up the manhunt operation that was after me. Making sure I wouldn't call her in a drunken moment and tell her the truth.

He didn't have to worry, though... I would never have the guts to call her. Not after the kind of pain I'd put her through.



Of course, I can't tell these guys the real story, so I have to change the details...

--HOPED SHE'D COME WITH ME, BUT INSTEAD SHE SPENDS A YEAR HUNTING ME DOWN BEFORE THEY LOSE THEIR FUNDING.

WELL, YOU'D'VE LET ME TAKE THAT SHOT TODAY, THAT WOULD'VE BEEN THE END OF IT.



OUR ORDERS WERE EXPLICIT. NO UNNECESSARY CASUALTIES... ONCE THE MISSION WAS A BUST, ANY CASUALTIES WERE UNNECESSARY.

YEAH... I GUESS SO.



HMMF, GUY WITH HER MUST BE HER HUSBAND. HEARD SHE MARRIED ANOTHER AGENT A FEW YEARS BACK...

NOTICE HOW ALL HIS SHOTS WERE AIMED AT ME?





WOULDN'T'VE MINDED GETTING MY HANDS ON HIM...

SHIT, LISTEN TO YOU. YOU JUST NEED TO DRINK MORE BEER AND WASH THAT PAST RIGHT OUT OF YOUR HEAD...



HEY, WHERE YOU HEADED?

I'M GONNA DO SOME SIGHTSEEING WHILE WE'RE HERE... SEE YOU GUYS BACK AT THE SAFE HOUSE LATER ON.



AND IT WAS GREAT TO WORK TOGETHER, REALLY. EVEN IF THE MISSION DIDN'T GO RIGHT...



CHRIST. I THOUGHT HE WAS ABOUT TO GET UNDER THE TABLE AND START SUCKING...

AH, HE'S NOT SO BAD.



HE TRIES TOO HARD, MAN. DOES REMIND ME OF A DOG, THOUGH, WITH THOSE NEEDY EYES... WHINING FOR APPROVAL.



STOP IT.

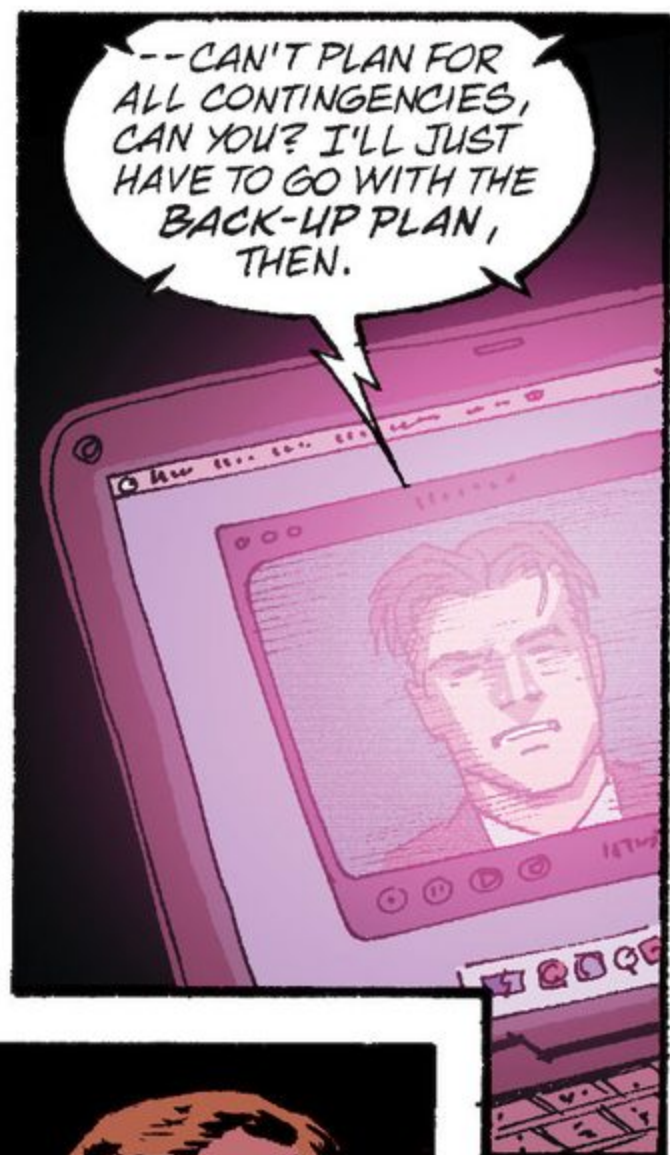
HEY, MAYBE WE SHOULD'VE LISTENED TO THE REST OF HIS STORY. MAYBE HE GOT HIS POWERS BY BEING FUCKED BY A BUNCH OF RADIOACTIVE JUNKYARD DOGS...



SIGHTSEEING? HE'S EVEN MORE OF A WOMAN THAN YOU ARE...



Later that night, on a scrambled signal, I give Tao the news. Surprisingly, he takes it well...

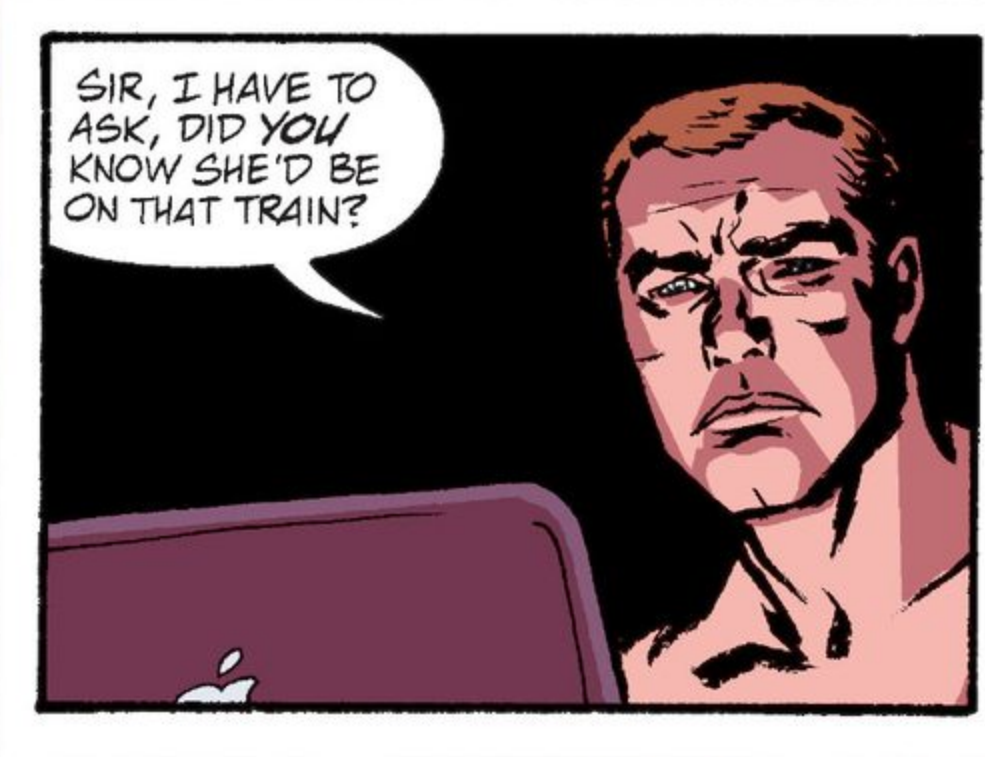


-- CAN'T PLAN FOR ALL CONTINGENCIES, CAN YOU? I'LL JUST HAVE TO GO WITH THE BACK-UP PLAN, THEN.

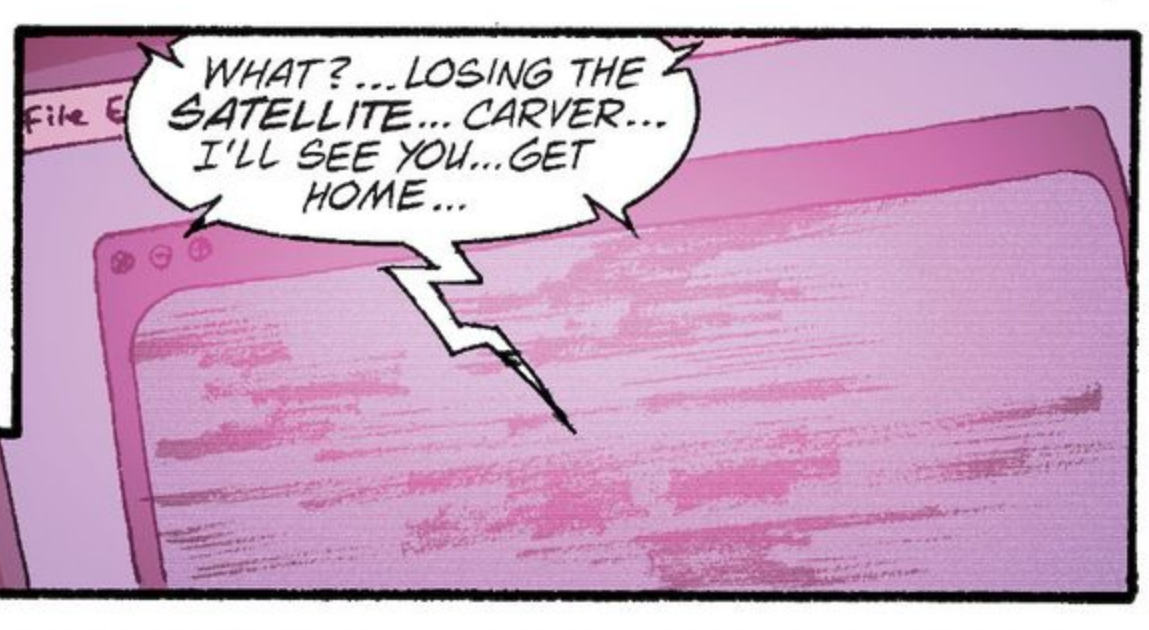


AND WHAT'S THAT?

ACTUALLY LEAKING HIS LOCATION TO THE RUSSIANS. THE END RESULT IS THE SAME.



SIR, I HAVE TO ASK, DID YOU KNOW SHE'D BE ON THAT TRAIN?



WHAT?... LOSING THE SATELLITE... CARVER... I'LL SEE YOU... GET HOME...



Tao's convenient loss of signal gives me time to ponder my own question, because if ever there was someone who planned for all contingencies, it was him.

Was this another test? And did I pass or fail?



KNK KNK

PIT BULL?
DO YOU HAVE
ANY IDEA
WHAT TIME
IT IS?

YEAH, YEAH. I KNOW,
BUT YOU'RE NOT
GONNA GIVE A SHIT
WHEN YOU SEE WHAT
I GOT...



WHAT ARE
YOU TALKING
ABOUT?

JUST TRUST
ME, MAN, YOU'VE
GOT TO SEE IT WITH
YOUR OWN EYES
TO APPRECIATE IT.



I JUST THOUGHT,
FIRST MISSION AND
ALL, Y'KNOW, AFTER
THE WAY IT WENT, I
SHOULD GET YOU A
CONSOLATION PRIZE...



...CHECK
IT OUT, YOUR
EX-BITCH'S NEW
HUSBAND...



YOU
KIDNAPPED
HIM?

DUDE, IT WAS SO SLICK...
TRACKED THEM FROM THE TRAIN
DEPOT TO THIS HOTEL AND GOT
HIM IN THE PARKING GARAGE WHEN
HE WENT DOWN TO GET A TAPE
RECORDER OUT OF THE CAR...



Stupid kid.
Stupid eager-
to-please
fucking kid.



-- SHOULD'VE SEEN IT. I
CAME OUT OF THE SHADOWS
LIKE A FUCKIN' NINJA OR--



AKK--



I stop myself
from killing him.
Just barely.

And then, for the first
time since I went
undercover, I do
something I'm
absolutely certain
is a mistake...

...But I
just don't
care.

GO.
WALK...

WH--
WHY?

JUST WALK,
ASSHOLE.

AND TELL
HER NOT TO
LOOK FOR ME
ANYMORE.

Why?

Because I cared about
her...I loved her...And
she's already lost too
much on my account...

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